

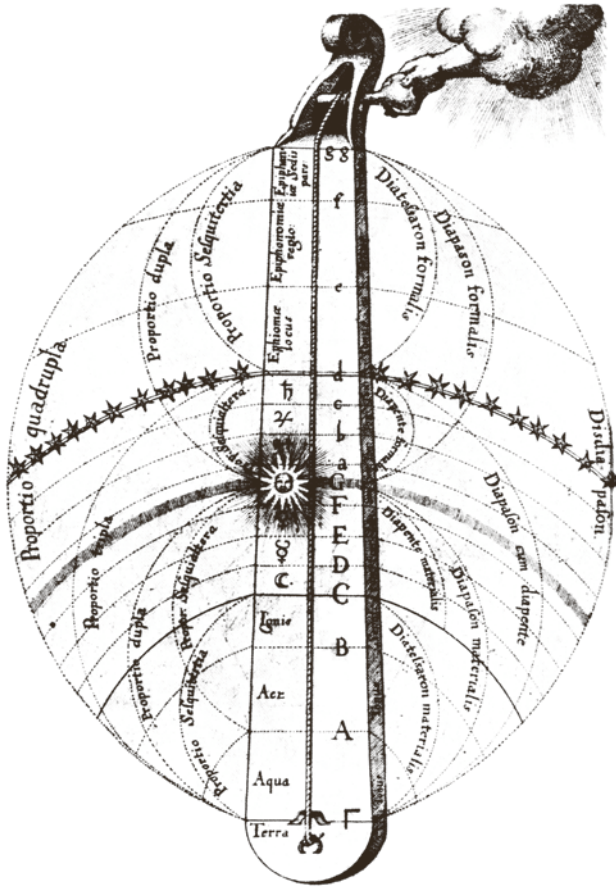
Jens Johler
Tuning the World

Excerpt

These extracts contain the prologue as well as four
of a total of forty-eight chapters in the book.

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Celestial Monochord,
Robert Fludd 1618

Jens Johler

TUNING THE WORLD

Novel

Based on an idea by
Johler & Burow



Alexander Verlag Berlin

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Map on front end-sheet and back end-sheet: *Nova totius Germaniae Descriptio geographica*, Henricus Scherer, around 1700, copper engraving. Map

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Appendix:
Fiction and Facts

»Had circumstances led him to a great Catholic court or to an independent bourgeois position, and he certainly would have welcomed such an outcome, he would have become absolutely the greatest opera composer of his time.«

Nikolaus Harnoncourt

»What Newton was as natural philosopher, Sebastian Bach was as a musician.«

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart

March 1722

HE OPENED HIS EYES and stared at the beams of the ceiling. Pale blue moonlight came through the window.

He wanted to rise, get out of bed, get into his study, the composer's chamber, make a little music, play something, anything to drive away the ghosts that had haunted him in his dream. But he couldn't move. His legs would not obey him, nor his arms, not even a single finger.

What's the matter with me?

He could still feel the pressure on his chest. Someone had put his boot down on it and pressed. He felt as though the boot were still pressing him down; his chest was constricted; he had a hard time breathing.

I can't get any air.

He listened to her breathing, even and steady beside him. When she exhaled, she made a soft whistling sound, a high G sharp. He wanted to wake her and ask her to help get up. He opened his mouth to say: please help me, I can't move, I can't get any air but couldn't make a sound.

He couldn't do anything, not a thing. All he could do was lie there and stare at the beams.

Dear God, don't let me be paralyzed.

He closed his eyes and tried to think back on the dream. Who was it placing his boot on his chest? And how did it all come about? His feelings told him that something had happened in the dream, something that led to his paralysis. He had the curious notion that he had to return and ensure that the dream took a different course. With a different outcome.

Only of this world.

That's not how Erdmann had said it but that's how he meant it.

Your music is only of this world.

He had to go back.

Images from his dream arose within him. The carriage. The street. The canal. Now he remembered the shock that had seized him when the carriage started to sink, further and further down, deeper and deeper, until the water washed over him. But the water did not enter the carriage; the carriage continued unchecked on its way below the water surface. It was as though he were sitting in a fish as Jonas had in the belly of the whale.

I went in the wrong direction, he thought. No revelation of Heaven on Earth. No Jacob's ladder reaching upward. Only earthly music—that's all it is. I have failed. No, worse than that.

The pressure on his chest grew. A dark figure suddenly stood in front of the bed, straight as a pole, his right hand raised heavenward. A prophet. A messiah. A ruler over the tuning of the world. The others who surrounded him looked up at him fearfully, at his fiery eyes and his arm pointing heavenward.

Only she didn't look up.

Bach followed her gaze; his eyes moved from the prophet's black cloak to the black trousers and leather boots. But no. There was only one boot. Only the right foot was shod.

Incredulously, filled with horror, Bach's eyes were transfixed by the left foot.

I. Departure

ON THE FIFTEENTH OF MARCH 1700, shortly before sunrise, Bach set off. Johann Christoph accompanied him to the town gate and, since the morning light still refused to break, part of the way beyond it. When they stopped on top of the mountain, they saw the sun sending its first rays across the edge of the forest.

Will you be all right alone?

Bach didn't answer. Robbers and gypsies had their homes in the woodlands, waiting to grab his knapsack and violin. As soon as Johann Christoph would leave him, they'd pounce on him.

You're shivering. Are you cold?

He wasn't cold, he was just shivering. He would immediately break into a run after his brother was gone.

Well, then, young 'un, God bless you. Bach returned his brother's embrace and went off at a gallop.

Wait!

Johann Christoph pulled a rolled-up bundle of paper from his waistcoat. I almost forgot, he said. Here, it's yours now. Take it.

Bach took a step back, staring at the bundle.

You want me to put it in your knapsack?

While Johann Christoph untied his brother's knapsack and stowed away the roll of paper, Bach furtively wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

And work hard, always work hard, hear?

He nodded.

Why don't you say something? – And then, before finally going on his way back to Ohrdruf, Johann Christoph said in

passing, more in a murmur than out loud: Beware of pride, young 'un. There will come a time where you'll surpass us all.

Astonished, Bach watched his brother walk away. For five long years had Johann Christoph been his teacher, a strict teacher who uttered nary a word of praise for him. And now this? And what was it that his brother had said? Was it a prophecy, a wish, a mission, an order?

Just as Johann Christoph disappeared between the trees, the incandescent ball of fire rose on the horizon. Inwardly, a radiantly pure C major chord resounded, soon dissolving in individual notes as if played on a harp. As he started walking again, Bach whistled the arpeggio softly to himself. All of a sudden, his fear was gone. He thought of Lüneburg, the Latin school, of the renowned Georg Böhm who played the organ there; he thought about the musical manuscript in his knapsack and about the words of his brother. And while it brought tears to his eyes once more, he hurried along so as to arrive in Gotha on time, where Georg Erdmann, his fellow pupil, eagerly awaited him.

ERDMANN WAS SITTING ON A STONE in front of the town hall and jumped up when he saw Bach. He was two years older than Bach, thinner and taller by a head. He, too, carried a knapsack on his back and instead of a violin, he had a lute slung over his shoulder.

He had been reading a lot in the last past few weeks, said Erdmann as they left the city walls behind them, and had found his calling. He would become a philosopher, the greatest one who ever lived. He would acquire all the knowledge of his time. Natural philosophy, moral philosophy, philosophy of law, everything! He had just read about an Englishman named New-Tone.

Bach pricked up his ears. He liked the name.

This New-Tone or Newton, Erdmann continued to explain, is quite an eminent philosopher; some say even more eminent than Leibniz, but that was for posterity to decide. Anyway, one day this Englishman was lying under an apple tree and fell asleep. And while he was peacefully dreaming away, he was rudely awakened all of a sudden, namely by an apple, which fell right on his head. He was angry and annoyed and, naturally, he wanted to vent his anger at someone. But at whom? There wasn't a soul in sight. After reflecting upon this for some time, the Englishman had a sudden inspiration on how all this was connected: the falling of the apple to the ground, the movement of the Earth around the sun, the movement of the moon around the Earth and indeed all other movements that are not the result of an external impact. So there is a force inherent to all physical bodies or at work in mysterious ways between them, without the bodies directly touching. And Newton called this magical force gravity.

Bach was fascinated. Softly, he said the word to himself: gravity, grav-i-ty. The word fascinated him. The thought fascinated him that everything, the near and the far, the heavens and the Earth, the moon and the apple were connected by a mysterious force. Grav-i-ty – he tested various intonations of the word to get nearer to its meaning; he elongated single syllables, stretching them; he varied melody and rhythm; and the more lavishly he did so, the more he got caught up in the word; he stamped his feet, clapped his hands, snapped his fingers, until he noticed that Erdmann was looking at him with irritation.

Gravity, he said one final time in an austere voice, with a gesture of apology.

Erdmann interpreted this as encouragement and started to talk about Johannes Kepler, an astronomer who had postulated certain laws about the movement of the planets.

While listening to his friend with one ear, Bach heard the distant call of a cuckoo, asking himself what it meant that it first sang a minor, then a major third. It sounded like farewell and loss.

A SHORT TIME BEFORE DARKNESS DESCENDED, they arrived in Langensalza. A little boy, barefoot, in ragged clothes, followed on their heels. He showed them the high tower of the market church and proudly explained to them that the stagecoaches, which had only recently started to stop here, went from Moscow clear to Amsterdam. When they got to the house of Erdmann's uncle, they gave the boy a pfennig, and he immediately scampered away from them, as though he wanted to get the money to safety.

The uncle's house looked gray and bleak. It was built of wooden beams and clay bricks, had small crooked windows and a roof made of gray shingles. Through a high archway next to the house, one could see a cobbled courtyard and beyond it the smithy.

Erdmann's uncle was the town's blacksmith. He was a strong man with a powerful head and sad eyes. Reluctantly, he showed Bach and Erdmann a place for them to sleep and summoned them into the kitchen for the evening meal.

They ate the bread soup and the cabbage with millet gruel in silence. The house seemed to be ruled by some form of black magic that made mute all words, all sounds, all thoughts. Bach could only feel a tormenting numbness in his head. Obviously, Erdmann felt the same. The uncle however thawed a little after he drank a glass of brandy, without offering them any. Who is your father, the uncle asked Bach.

Ambrosius Bach, the town musician in Eisenach, he replied. But his father was not alive anymore. He died five years ago. First his mother, then his father.

His wife died too, the uncle said. Half a year ago.

Bach nodded. He knew this already from Erdmann. The uncle did not have any children. He was all alone now.

When hitting the red-hot iron with his hammer in the morning, the uncle said, he sometimes didn't know whom he was hitting ... may God forgive him.

Bach remembered how his mother died. He stood next to the bed where she was laid out and imagined she was moving slightly, that she was breathing. Wake up, he whispered, wake up. He couldn't believe it wasn't in her power to do so. He was nine years old then. His father died a couple of months later. Still, he had had the good fortune not to be placed in an orphanage. His brother, who was the organist in Ohrdruf even then, took him in.

Why didn't they continue at school in Ohrdruf, the uncle asked.

They stopped the free meals for us, Erdmann explained. In Lüneburg, they would get everything for free. Accommodations, meals, classes. For that, they had to sing in the matins choir.

What nonsense all this is, said the uncle, and it wasn't clear whether he meant the cancelation of the subsidized meals in Ohrdruf or singing in the matins choir in Lüneburg.

They slept on straw sacks in a room adjoining the kitchen. As he was falling asleep, Bach thought back on the time in Eisenach. What joy it had been to accompany father when he went to play the little tower pieces on the trumpet from the balcony of the town hall or played at St. George's Church under the direction of the cantor. What joy it was to walk up with him to the Wartburg, where Luther had once found asylum, and listen to his father talking about all the creatures having their own melody, human beings, animals, even the plants. What joy it was to play music together with appren-

tices and journeymen, who were always willing to show him what they could do on the violin, the lute, the trumpet, the clavichord. And what joy it was to hear Uncle Christoph on the great organ, who had mastered the laws of harmony so perfectly that he could have five voice parts playing beside one another concurrently without difficulty. To be able one day to play as his uncle could—that had been his greatest wish from the very beginning.

IN THE MORNING, powerful hammer blows shook the house. Half asleep, Bach imagined his own head lying on the anvil and the next blow would split his head open. He leaped from the straw sack, slipped into his pants and waistcoat, buckled on the knapsack, threw the violin over his shoulder and hurried outside.

Erdmann was ready to depart, waiting for him in front of the house. Pythagoras, he said.

Bach gave him a questioning look.

Forging hammers, Erdmann said. That's how Pythagoras hit upon the secret of harmony.

Ah, yes, Bach said. I've heard about it.

The farther they walked into the countryside, the more people they met on the road. Farmers riding to their fields on donkeys or pulling sluggish farm horses by the reins. Children in ragged clothes, of whom it was hard to tell whether they were tramping to work in the fields or whether they were orphans seeking their fortune in the world before they would be picked up and shut inside the workhouse. Journeymen on the road wearing the traditional clothing of their professions. And time and again beggars and thieves, who had one of their hands chopped off or even a hand and a foot. Once they overtook a lame man and a blind man. The blind man supported the lame man, and the lame man led the blind

man. Bach would have liked to give them alms but he hardly had anything himself. Every once in a while, grand carriages passed them by, and they had to take care that the coachman didn't snap his whip on their backs just for fun. Individual riders also tore by them at full gallop, expecting that they would jump aside in time. Sometimes, dubious characters crossed their way, who covetously looked at their instruments, Bach's violin and Erdmann's lute. When asked for directions, and that happened more than once, they had to confess they didn't know their way around there either. At least Erdmann had written a list of the places they had to pass through on their way to Lüneburg. It was a pretty long list for a pretty long journey.

2. Final court hearing

IN SATURDAY AROUND NOON, they arrived at the border of the Duchy of Braunschweig-Lüneburg. They showed their passports and accompanying letters from Cantor Elias Herda and the invitation from St. Michael's Monastery in Lüneburg. They were allowed to pass. Carriages stood idle on both sides of the barrier and couldn't go on. The track width of the roads, only consisting of two cobbled ribbons running parallel to each other, was different in the two countries. So the coachmen had their hands full, replacing axles and reducing or expanding the track width. The latter depended on where they came from and where they wanted to go. Meanwhile, the passengers stood by the wayside, offering unsolicited advice.

Erdmann and Bach joined them, and Erdmann commenced to reflect upon the fact that Germany was fragmented into so many tiny principalities. Each of them with a little Sun King! Each with its very own track width! But wait and see! Toward the end of this *saeculum*, Germany will be just as unified as England and France! Then this nonsense will stop. Then new roads will be built that are uniform for the entire country, in straight lines, at right angles to one another, constructed according to the Laws of Reason. He would bet his life on it!

The passengers around them turned, looking at both wayfarers suspiciously. Who were *they*? What were they doing here? How dare they hold inflammatory speeches here?

Bach seized Erdmann by the sleeve of his rust-colored jacket and pulled him vigorously away.

THE NEXT NIGHT, just a week after they had hiked off, Bach suggested going into an inn and eating as much as they

could for a change to mark the occasion, at his expense. He would treat his friend.

It's your birthday? Erdmann asked.

March twenty-first, said Bach. I'm fifteen now. Although ...

He wasn't completely certain whether he was really fifteen now. To be exact, he was eleven days short. The calendar had been converted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which had been in use in Catholic countries for a hundred years at this point. The adjustment had made it necessary to drop eleven days from the year. The eighteenth of February was not followed by the nineteenth but by the first of March. Eleven days rubbed out, just like that, perdu! One could really start speculating, he said, whether I'm fifteen today or only on the first of April.

Then what we ought to do is celebrate it twice, said Erdmann.

You would like that, wouldn't you, said Bach.

Tables were free at the inn called "Zur Linde." They picked a table in the rear of the room that was lit by candles and oil lamps. Bach ordered roast rabbit and wine.

After the second glass, he told his friend about the musical manuscript his brother had stuck into his knapsack. They were copies of musical pieces that his brother had kept in a locked cabinet. Scores by Pachelbel, Böhm, Buxtehude and even by some Italian composers. Bach had secretly copied out the pieces by the light of the moon; and when his brother had found this out, he took the scores away and locked them again in the cabinet.

Why's that? Erdmann asked.

Why's what?

Why did he take them away from you?

Because he told me not to, Bach said.

And why did he do that?

Because they are precious. He paid a lot of money for such copies. And the more there are of them, the lower their price is.

Got you, said Erdmann. But after all, you're his brother.

Sure thing, said Bach. That's why he gave them back to me.

In the meantime, the innkeeper had stepped up to their table and put two more glasses of wine down.

With all respect, Mr. Innkeeper, said Erdmann, we didn't order this.

They come from the cloth merchant over there, the innkeeper said, nodding his head in the direction of a well-dressed patron. He asks whether you gentlemen would play a little music. A song on the lute. Accompanied by the fiddle. Maybe also a little singing?

A song? Well, why not? They had had a good meal and drunken some. But not so much that they wouldn't be able to play music anymore. And who knows, maybe the innkeeper would let them stay overnight for free if their music made the patrons consume more wine. They unpacked their instruments and set themselves up in the center of the room.

The fancy took me, Erdmann sang, *to ride to the woods, where the air is filled with the song of birds.* Bach sang the second voice part and fiddled melodious figures around it.

The patrons applauded with some restraint.

Erdmann didn't wait too long to play the second song:

You are the goldsmith's young daughter

And I am the farmer's son, yes, his son

The applause grew stronger. Some of the patrons had sung a couple of lines along with them. The mood lifted perceptibly, it got cheerier and soon the applause grew stronger. Some of the patrons had sung a couple of lines along with them. The mood lifted perceptibly, it became more cheerful, and soon people wouldn't let them stop. New requests for songs were shouted out to them, so many all at once, and Erdmann

knew them all: Winter is bygone or A monk went to the Upper Country and got to know a nun, which was a pretty lewd song, however. Bach felt pretty ashamed as he heard: He led her to the altar, where he read her a Psalter, followed by He led her to the bell pull rope, where he ding'd her five hours in scope – no, that definitely went too far, the more so as the guests were now hooting and bellowing their own obscene additions. Bach struck up a Gypsy dance he had picked up at a peasants' wedding near Ohrdruf, with breathtakingly quick runs and swiftly changing staccato and legato passages, and stamped on the wooden floorboards with his feet. As soon as they had started, one of the guests grabbed the waitress and started cavorting with her in a circle so wildly you feared they would get dizzy and fall to the ground; but they didn't fall, they just flung their arms around each other's necks when it ended and laughed, and the other guests were happy with them and clapped their hands; and in the general ruckus, the cloth merchant shouted: Encore! Encore! The next round is on me!

B OARD AND LODGE ARE FREE, said the landlord the next morning as he served them breakfast; and should they ever come to his neck of the woods again and would like to play dance music again, they were always welcome.

The cloth merchant came to their table and offered to take them in his carriage. He was going to Wernigerode.

Erdmann glanced at his list and said they would gladly accept his offer.

After sitting across one another silently for a time, still tired from last night's wine, the cloth merchant started a conversation about the witch trial that was to take place in Wernigerode tomorrow. He really wanted to be there. The witch who was to be burnt had confessed her guilt to all four charges, namely association with the Devil, liaison with the Devil, par-

ticipation in a witches' sabbath and malevolent magic. Her confession would be publicly proclaimed tomorrow. The confession wasn't actually needed, since the witch had flaming red hair, which was already suspicious enough. In addition, she had a wart on her left arm pit that neither bled nor hurt when it was pricked with a pin – an unmistakable sign.

Whom had the witch harmed?, Erdmann asked.

That's irrelevant, the merchant said. The territorial law code expressly states that a person who forms an alliance with the Devil will be punished and put to death by fire even if the person had not harmed anybody with her black magic. But since the young gentleman asked: The witch had cast a spell on the cattle, so they got sick, and some cows even died.

Erdmann wanted to know whether the witch had confessed from the very onset or only after torture.

Well, said the cloth merchant, at first, a bailiff in Wernigerode made inquiries and brought the case to court, and the court decided that charges should be preferred. The decision was signed by the Count. So the witch was arrested, thrown into the tower, undressed completely, depilated and questioned in a friendly manner at first. She denied everything so vehemently and stubbornly, however, that they showed her the instruments of torture: thumbscrews, the rack, leg screws and so forth, but all to no avail. Finally, the Council for Judgment made a decision for use of torture; and soon thereupon, there was a confession, and this confession will be read aloud publicly tomorrow. He certainly didn't want to miss that. Especially all the things the witch had confessed to in terms of her liaison with the Devil. You might learn a thing or two, he added, without noticing that Erdmann made a face. But, he continued, I'm also very anxious to learn about the shenanigans of the witches during their witches' sabbath on the top of the Blocksberg Mountain. And, of course, how did they

ever manage to ride through the air on a broomstick? Flying, he said, is an old dream of mankind. Would the young gentlemen be interested in attending the trial?

Bach looked at Erdmann questioningly. Erdmann shook his head.

But why? exclaimed the merchant, uncomprehending. You wouldn't want to miss a thing like that. Didn't even Martin Luther preach that sorceresses must not be allowed to live? That they steal milk, butter and everything else from a house and can create mysterious diseases in the human knee that, by and by, consume the whole body? That they minister potions and incantations so as to call forth hatred, love, storms, all sorts of havoc in the house and on the fields and they are able to make people limp with their magic arrows even from a distance of a mile or more, while nobody could heal the lame victim?

I beg your pardon, said Erdmann, Luther or no Luther: this whole witch-burning business is a nothing but insufferable nonsense. I have a very low opinion about it, truly. I'm not even sure that such a thing as witches ever existed. Nothing but figments of the imagination! For example: They accused the mother of Johannes Kepler of being a witch only because people thought they recognised her in his novel about a trip to the moon. So this great man spent many years in his life defending his mother. Finally, they released her, but by then she was in miserable shape. And a year later, she died of exhaustion. Imagine that! Johannes Kepler's mother!

He didn't know any Kepler, said the merchant.

Then he presumably didn't know Christian Thomasius either?

I know a Christian Sartorius, said the merchant, but you probably don't mean him?

No, said Erdmann, I am talking about Master Thomasius

at the University in Halle. Thomasius has given irrefutable proof that any kind of interrogation by torture is not only inhumane but useless. A person being tortured would confess to anything his torturers had put to him; truth never comes to light this way. Thus it happened not long ago that seven men were hanged for the hold-up of a stage coach; on the rack, all seven confessed, although it turned out later that only four robbers had been involved in that particular hold-up. But it was not merely three too many who were hanged but seven. Because they caught red-handed the four who were actually responsible when they committed another robbery. And naturally, they also were hanged. So now, the total was eleven.

Oh well, the cloth merchant said indifferently, the others probably also had it coming.

IN WERNIGERODE, the preparations for the spectacle were in full swing. Merchants from near and far had set up their stands. A wooden platform had been boarded together for the councillors and local notables who had come to town for the occasion. The stake had already been erected, although the final trial was scheduled for the next day.

The cloth merchant could hardly hide his feverish anticipation. Even Bach was tempted to go along with the mood for a moment. Erdmann wanted to get out of Wernigerode as quickly as possible. He said he had an appointment in Wolfenbüttel.

An appointment? With whom?

Well, said Erdmann evasively. With a high-ranking personality.

Upon my soul, said Bach. Not with the Prince, is it?

With a Prince in the realm of the mind, yes, said Erdmann at last. With Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the philosopher.

Oh, I can hardly wait, Bach said.

4. Latin school

WHY ARE YOU ALWAYS going on about Böhm, Erdmann asked, as they were on their way from Bienenbüttel to Lüneburg.

Just like you were going on about Leibniz, said Bach, before he played that trick on us with his amanuensis.

Are you trying to say he's the greatest musician of our time?

The greatest? said Bach, shaking his head, pondering. Who knows? My brother has some of his pieces in his armoire. Dance suites in the French manner, preludes, overtures.

Well? Are they so special?

They have such a peculiar...

A peculiar – what?

I don't know. Perhaps there's no word for it. But look – that must be it.

In the distance, they beheld the town wall and three church towers. They walked faster and, in a short time, they were able to show their papers at the town gate of Lüneburg.

THEY WERE ALREADY EAGERLY EXPECTED. They had barely entered the cobbled yard of St. Michael's Monastery when a student attended to them, another scholarship student as they correctly assumed. He had fiery red hair, freckles, a snub nose and pouting lips. My name is Waldemar, he said. And would they be the new students from Thuringia?

Yes, that's who they were.

Then he would take them to the headmaster. And if they allowed him to give them some advice, then he'd suggest they speak loudly and clearly, since Mr. Büsche was already sixty and quite hard of hearing. He doesn't want to admit it, though, Waldemar said, and thinks you're doing it to spite

him when you don't get across what you want to say. Then he starts slapping you forthwith.

The headmaster was sitting behind a huge desk; his face was red and a bit puffy; his black coat had a greasy sheen, and his powdered wig looked as if it hadn't been combed for many years. Where had they been all this time, he asked roughly.

It was a long trip, Erdmann bellowed.

Why do you bellow like that, the head master asked. After all, I'm not hard of hearing.

I beg your forgiveness, Erdmann said in a somewhat lower voice.

What? the headmaster asked, with a minatory mien.

Erdmann ducked his head.

We've been on the road, on foot, for a solid two weeks, said Bach in a volume he hoped was exactly right. Elias Herda, their cantor in Ohrdruf, sends his regards to Mr. Büsche.

Ah, yes, Elias, the headmaster said. Thanks for telling me. And now, this particular young man, to wit our Waldemarius, will bring you both to cantor Braun, who, by the way, is the *quartus* of our school, the number four, and also the person teaching the *quarta*. But that ought not to concern them; they would attend the *prima* as they had previously. Waldemarius, whom he delegated to act as their cicerone herewith, will show them the dormitories, refectory, classrooms. And tomorrow, if they would like, the town as well – Sandviertel, Sülzviertel, Marktviertel and Wasserviertel. I presume, you have already seen the limestone rock?

Certainly, said Bach.

What's that? the headmaster asked, raising his arm as if to threaten them with blows. But he only put his hand behind his ear.

We have seen the limestone rock, said Bach in a clear voice, and it was impressive indeed.

CANTOR AUGUST BRAUN was a gaunt man of around fifty. His wig was on the table next to him when they entered; he didn't bother putting it on. A crown of thin gray hair adorned his pointed head. He had Erdmann sing something, then Bach, and he was pleased, nodding after listening to Bach's boy soprano. He asked them a couple of questions about their instruments and gave them the music score for the choir practice next day. He said they might do a little practicing beforehand. Regrettably, they had missed Annunciation Day, he said reproachfully, but next Sunday was Judica, and they would be singing in the matins choir. And he had scheduled them for the Saturday before Palm Sunday to sing in the large choir as well as for the Passion on Good Friday. Did they have any questions?

Bach and Erdmann shook their heads.

Well then, let's get going. Our Waldemar here, whom you seem to have already made friends with, will show you the rest. By the way, he's also a good singer, despite the fact he's not from Thuringia.

Waldemar winked at them conspiratorially in a way that seemed to say he couldn't really sing and was just pretending.

Before showing them the dormitories, he warned them in a hushed voice about the young gentlemen from the Collegium Illustre, who had their dormitories in the inner courtyard, too. A *bagarre* with them would occur every once in a while.

What's that? asked Bach.

A brawl.

No, I mean the Collegium Illustre.

Oh that, said Waldemar with a dismissive gesture.

Well?

The Knights' School. Some also call it the Knights' Academy, but if you look at it objectively, it's just a Latin school just like ours, only for the nobility, so the great lords can mingle

among themselves. They learn all sorts of things there, things us mere mortals don't need. Heraldry, courtly dances, carving, making compliments, bowing and scraping and such-like. The young gentlemen pride themselves hugely over the whole thing.

How many of them are there, Bach asked.

Fifteen.

And how many are scholarship students?

The same number.

Then, one of these days, we should organize a contest, said Bach. Not in bowing and scraping, of course, but perhaps...

In philosophizing, Erdmann suggested.

Or in singing, said Bach, we certainly can do that much better than they do.

A SINGING CONTEST never came about, though, and would have been meaningless anyway. They often sang together with the knightly students, and there was nobody who could deny that the choir students were more musical. The aristocratic gentlemen didn't much care. They looked down on the scholarship students like they would on poor chirping birds who were born to warble, who had to do so out of necessity. The only one among them to whom they looked with something approaching respect after a while was Erdmann, because he spoke so well and got a kick out of styling his language to courtly etiquette. I've thought it all over, he said after some time had passed. I don't want to become a philosopher after all but a diplomat.

This surprised Bach. Not so much because Erdmann all of a sudden wanted something different than what he'd wanted only a couple weeks ago but, instead, because he had actually made such a decision. For him, Bach, the question didn't exist. It had been clear from the onset he would be a musician. He

came from a family of musicians, so what was there to think about? At the most, the question was: what kind of a musician? Town musician like his father? Organist like his uncle and his brother? Cantor like Elias Herda? Or capellmeister at one court or another? And there was another question he asked himself sometimes before he fell asleep: With whom would he vie in the future? With the greatest musicians of his craft, with Reincken and Buxtehude, Corelli and Lully?

THE DISCIPLINE at the school was very strict. Every little thing was planned, and any deviation from the rules was strictly punished – when you were a scholarship student anyway.

But while Erdmann clandestinely rebelled against the unnaturalness of the unyielding rules, Bach acquiesced to the strictly disciplined education.

Along with the others, he got up at five in the morning, washed, combed his hair, dressed and, right where he was, got down on his knees for their first prayer, whether on a stone floor or scrubbed floor boards, as soon as the first quarter struck. During meals, he heard the chapter of the Bible that was read to them, refraining from speaking or any mischief, exactly as prescribed by the school's set of rules. He kept his clothes, shoes, stockings and underwear clean; he swept the rooms when his turn came. During classes, he was attentive, made notes and memorized as much as he could, which required little effort since his memory had always been good.

THE SUBJECTS TAUGHT were Latin and Greek, Religion and Logic, History and Geography, Mathematics, Physics and German Literature.

Bach already had had a special knack for mathematics when he went to school in Eisenach and Ohrdruf and so he could

shine in this subject. During the first week, he had the chance to prove the theorem of Pythagoras and, when the teacher asked him what else he knew about Pythagoras, he answered that Pythagoras was one of the great sages of antiquity. Not least, he explained, Pythagoras was famous for finding the mathematical proportions of the harmony.

The teacher asked whether he also knew how Pythagoras came to his discovery.

Certainly, Bach replied, taking a quick look at Erdmann. Lost in thought, Pythagoras walked by a smithy, where several journeymen were hammering the iron on an anvil and suddenly he noticed how they created harmonic sounds; to wit, the fourth, the fifth and the octave. Astonished, he walked into the smithy to look for the cause of this array of sounds and ultimately discovered that the harmonic proportions of the notes have whole number ratios. He then demonstrated it on the monochord, which the Greeks called the *kanón*.

How would you describe a monochord, the teacher asked, doing so because some of the students looked puzzled.

Well, said Bach, it's a board or, rather, a sound box over which a single string is stretched, let's say with a length of four cubits. When strumming this string, you hear a note you could call the tonic. If the string is divided up into two equal halves by positioning it over a wooden bridge and the half string is hit, the octave will sound. Hence the proportion: whole string to half string, or 2:1. If you now divide off two-thirds of the string and strum the longer part, you get the fifth. So the fifth has the ratio: three-thirds to two-thirds, i.e. 3:2. The fourth, in turn, is ruled by the ratio of 4:3, the major third by the ratio 5:4, and so forth. And, as mentioned before: all harmonic intervals are governed by whole number ratios.

Excellent, said the teacher, then you also probably know what the Pythagorean comma is?

Oh, yes, Bach said eagerly without noticing how the others' eyes by now were turned on him with envy.

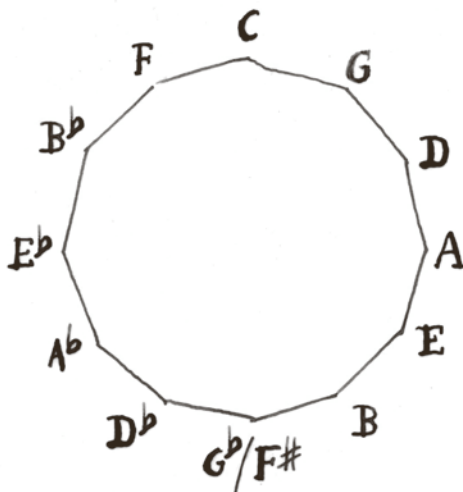
Well? asked the teacher.

A comma, said Bach, if you translate it literally from Greek, is nothing but a *section*, and in this case – well, it's not so easy to explain. Do I have permission to go to the blackboard and draw a sketch?

Please do so, said the teacher.

Bach got up from his desk and walked to the blackboard. Here is how it is, he said, turning to the class. If you tune perfect fifths on an instrument, namely exactly in a ratio of 3:2, and go up higher from fifth to fifth, from C to G, from G to D, from D to A and so forth, you'll return to the C after exactly twelve steps, only seven octaves higher. It's called the circle of fifths.

He turned his back to the class and drew the circle of fifths on the blackboard:



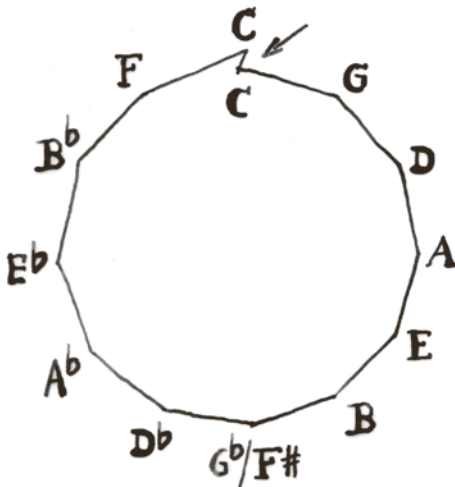
There you could see it. It began with C and ended with C, only seven octaves higher. It was simple.

And where is the Pythagorean comma? inquired the teacher.

Yes, Bach said, that's the real problem: If you tune perfect octaves, namely from C to C' and so forth, you'll have a different note than by tuning to perfect fifths.

Why? the teacher asked. Why is that?

Well, said Bach. It's a problem that hitherto no science has been able to resolve. The fact is: Twelve perfect fifths result in a different note than seven perfectly tuned octaves. Bach turned to the blackboard again, wiping away a section of the chalk circle at the upper C and added a small spike. Then he drew an arrow pointing straight to the spike and said: There. Here you can see it. The circle of fifths doesn't close. The beginning and the end do not match. God has presented us with a riddle here.



Thank you, Bach, said the teacher, that was an excellent lecture.

Bach put down the piece of chalk and strode back to his place.

But, queried the son of the apothecary after the teacher had allowed him to speak, what is the consequence of all this?

What the consequence is, said Bach, is that you cannot play in all keys on the organ or the clavichord. If the instrument has been tuned in C, you can get barely to E major, after that the wolf howls.

Howling of the wolf was an expression musicians used to describe a fifth that was so far out of tune that it only sounded miserable. It was called the wolf fifth.

All right, said the apothecary's son, but what does it all mean?

It primarily means, Erdmann interjected in the arrogant tone he had learned from listening to the aristocratic students, that the order of the world is quite imperfect.

Imperfect? asked the teacher, crossing his arms.

Well, said Erdmann, rising from his seat, after all, the world is indeed anything but perfect! At least it's in dire need of improvement – all progressive scholars agree on it.

So God has created the world in an imperfect manner? inquired the teacher. That's how His Lordship meant it, right, Erdmann? So God created the world – well, what now, Erdmann? Give me a hand here. Did He do so sloppily? In a slipshod manner?

Well...

Bach saw how beads of perspiration formed on Erdmann's upper lip.

But we just heard it from Bach, Erdmann said hesitantly: Everything doesn't fit together quite right here. It's not as it ought to be. If you tune to perfect octaves, you get to an-

other note than with tuning to perfect fifths. Such a difference would not exist in a perfect world. In a perfect world, the circle of fifths would be closed.

He folded his arms across his chest now, so they stood facing each other, the teacher and the student, both with their arms crossed.

So Your Highness intends to improve upon God's creation? the teacher said, ironically, unfolding his arms. It's not good enough for His Lordship: His Lordship knows better, and His Lordship will show us. His Lordship will show GOD, am I right? Give me an answer!

Bach would have liked to help Erdmann, but how? Erdmann was his friend. He admired his courage. He admired his brilliance. But was it permitted to set oneself up as a judge of Creation?

All color had drained from Erdmann's face. Beads of cold sweat covered his forehead.

At the moment, I can't answer that, said Erdmann evasively. I have to think it over first.

Well, the teacher said, smiling, go on, Erdmann. So now His Lordship has three days to think over how he wants to improve God's work. Three days in detention – get out!

Upright, with hunched shoulders, striding stiffly, with eyes fixed in front of him, Erdmann stalked to the door and set out for the detention room.

44. Channeled sounds

ERDMANN HAD COME in his own carriage from Danzig. He was the Tsar's Resident in Danzig and was on his way to Dresden, where he had been granted an audience with August the Strong, who owed his Polish crown to the Tsar.

Is it true that the Tsar had learned the craft of carpentry in Holland, Wilhelm Friedemann asked, when they were all sitting around the large table, eating supper.

Yes, said Erdmann, the Tsar actually did travel incognito on his first trip to the West, calling himself Peter Michailow or Piter Timmermann, and learned the craft of carpentry in Zaandam and Oostenburg. This all happened, though, a quarter century ago, he said. The Tsar was hugely interested in ships and a naval fleet, which, as is well-known, he later built. Generally, the Tsar was interested in any scientific and technological innovations developed in the West, also in a progressive administration and way of living, right up to clothes and hair styles. The matter of the beard tax is generally well-known, right?

Beard tax? asked Friedemann incredulously. Is that a joke?

Funny, yes, Erdmann said, but not a joke. As you know, the Russians have these infinitely long beards, due to tradition and religious convictions, and the Tsar had such a hatred for these beards that he came very close to implementing a ban on beards throughout the Empire. This would inevitably have resulted in a revolt of the people, led by the *raskolniki*, the Orthodox fanatics. So he, Erdmann, advised the Tsar not to ban beards but to put a tax on them, and since then, well, you see many a clean-shaven chin in Russia.

The young people, especially Friedemann, besieged the distinguished guest with many more questions: whether, as was

reported, the Tsar was really a man of such gigantic height; whether he had really condemned his own son to death; and about Erdmann's other adventures when traveling in France, England and Italy. Erdmann was happy to oblige.

After the meal, the two friends withdrew to the music room to smoke, drink a glass of red wine and chat for a little while.

He had just finished a piece that meant a lot to him, said Bach.

Namely?

Not so easy to explain.

Try anyway.

Well, here goes: Did Erdmann remember the lesson in Lüneburg, during which he, Bach, had scrawled the circle of fifths on the blackboard?

Three days in detention, said Erdmann, laughing.

And here it is, said Bach. Some years ago, he had learned of a tuning with which the circle of fifths could be closed and thus perfect order established. In theory, anyway. The practical proof had yet to come, he said. He had provided it now. With his work.

Good gracious, Erdmann said. My congratulations. But at the risk of being deemed an *imbécile* or obtuse: He had always believed the Pythagorean comma to be a physical and even mathematical fact of nature. A quandary of nature, as it were. Was it all of a sudden possible to change the laws of nature?

No, Bach said, that lies in God's hand alone.

And even in that case, he was skeptical, said Erdmann. So how was it possible to close the circle of fifths now?

Bach explained.

Interesting, said Erdmann, nodding thoughtfully several times. Quite interesting. If I understand you right, my friend, all fifths are tempered, all in equal measure?

Bach nodded.

And all thirds, too?

Those even more so, Bach said.

In other words: all notes are tempered?

Not all, Bach said. The keynote remains. When I tune the clavier in C, the C remains unchanged through all octaves.

But the other eleven notes are tempered?

Exactly.

Through all octaves.

Can't be done any other way.

In other words: They become imperfect, distorted? Because *tempered* is nothing but a euphemism for distorted. Am I right?

Well, Bach said hesitantly. He hadn't seen the matter from such a strict point of view till now, at least not with such a judicial undertone. Perfect – imperfect, distorted – undistorted, well, yes. It was indeed a quandary of nature. If you wanted to play everything, you have to make compromises. But Erdmann was a jurist; and jurists saw the world in black and white.

So, with this, the world has become perfect? Erdmann asked.

With this, the clavier is well-tempered, Bach retorted. Because one can go through all the tones and semitones without having to retune the instrument a single time. It was the perfect system. However, he was not all that keen to shout the news from the rooftops. You only made enemies that way. But, naturally, the future belonged to the evenly floating tuning. Once practical evidence had been delivered that you can modulate through all keys, thus substantially extending the range of musical expression, all and sundry will demand it. His objective while he had been tinkering on his work so long in monkish solitude – Bach added, with everything now pouring forth from him – was not to gallop through all the keys at any cost but, rather, to discover the ramified and intricate ways by which one could visit even the remotest harmonic

places without doing violence to anything and without rebuffing the listener. And – he could predict this much – all serious musicians after him would continue his pioneering work. They would explore the tonal space, every nook and cranny of it, turn the chords back and forth, extend them and find the courage for new dissonances. They would discover new harmonic laws and allow for new sound possibilities until, ultimately, everything would be expressed, everything would be tried out, everything would have been played and everything heard – and then, yes, then, they would leave this space and venture forth into completely new worlds – a world, perhaps, in which the keynote would no longer be the king with the dominant and subdominant as his ministers but in which all notes would be equal, standing side by side. Maybe even in such a way in which every note, as soon as it had sounded once, would have the right to sound a second time only once it had been the turn of every other note to do so. So none of them would dominate. That was something Erdmann would like, right?

Yes, yes, Erdmann said hesitantly.

But, of course, all this is music of the future, said Bach, the music of a faraway future. The music of the nearby future is the well-tempered clavier. He would love to give a sample of his work to his friend, but....

Go ahead, Erdmann said.

I don't want to bore you, said Bach.

I'm sure that won't happen.

Well, then. Bach sat down at the clavichord, played the prelude in F sharp major, began with the fugue and stopped in the middle of it.

Erdmann sat opposite of him in an armchair, brooding. The memory of the Dornheim fiasco came back to Bach.

He saw the emptied church before his inner eye. What's the matter? he queried.

We're on our way to an artificial world, Erdmann said.

Bach frowned, wrinkling his forehead. He had no idea what Erdmann was talking about.

We are building a city from scratch right in the middle of nowhere, on the marshes of the Neva River, practically overnight – it's called St. Petersburg.

Oh, well, the Russians.

We build factories, shipyards, cloth mills with thousands of workers, who all work according to one single scheme like wheels in a clock. We regulate rivers, dig canals across the country, so there's no difference any longer between river and canal. We light up cities with torches and lanterns and turn the night into day. With our new watches, we carry time from place to place until nobody will look at the sun and the stars any longer – but everybody will look at the hands on their watches. Don't you recognize the signs, Bach? We are in the process of creating an artificial world, a soulless, mechanical world. A world in which there's nothing left but cause and effect, cause and effect. On my journeys, I met with the natural philosophers from the Royal Society and the natural philosophers of the Académie Française; I met Halley, Newton, Flamsteed and all the rest of them. They take apart everything, all that's alive and all that's dead, and put it back together again. They dissect live animals, cut open corpses and look for the matter of life – the selfsame matter with which they could create new living beings. It's their goal to create a completely controllable world made by human hands. In order to accomplish this goal, they try out all sorts of things, Bach, anything that's possible. And if something does not fit in their order, they negate it, sort it out or destroy it. Ultimately, they will destroy men as well and create a new

human being, one without free will, one who functions only according to cause and effect – a human being as a machine. And nobody will be able to do anything about it, Bach, not me, not you, not the princes, not even the priests. I'm not a dreamer, Bach, I'm not rebelling against it – I just see what will come. But I always had hoped art, poetry, music would remain our refuge, a Garden of Eden in which men, even in a faraway future, will remember their origins, a reservation that allows them to stay in tune with the harmony of the world, at least once a day, at least once a week, at least once a month, at least once a year, at Christmas, at Easter or whenever they are given the privilege of listening to truthful music. But now...

He didn't end the sentence but fell silent.

Bach stared at him. What did his art and his knowledge have to do with this horror vision of a mechanical mankind?

You don't understand, Erdmann said.

No, said Bach. I don't understand.

How can I explain, Erdmann said more to himself than to Bach. And then, after a pause: Do you remember the despair you were in, in Lüneburg, when your teacher Georg Böhm was dissatisfied with your playing of the organ, because it was so perfect, so perfect, so virtuoso – but something was lacking? You remember?

Bach remembered.

And then came the day when Böhm told you about Boethius, about the three levels of music, which in turn constitute something like a mystical triad. Music – that was the realization that shook you so deeply that you told me about it with tears in your eyes: music has the mission of bringing harmony to men's souls, harmony with himself, harmony with his fellow man, harmony with the universe. I will write heavenly music, Erdmann, that's how you spoke; in my music,

I will reveal heaven on Earth, because music is Jacob's ladder leading heavenward.

Bach looked at Erdmann with an inquisitive glance. Nothing had changed, had it? That *was* the goal of music, it was his goal. What could anyone have against it?

Musica instrumentalis – musica humana, Erdmann said after refilling their glasses with red wine and lighting his meerschäum pipe with a pinewood chip – no musician, I'm almost tempted to say, no human being would deny the relationship. Haven't you created a sophisticated doctrine of emotions, you musicians, a set of tools by which you influence the emotions of your listeners just like hypnotists or magicians? You play an ascending melody, and a person becomes cheerful and buoyant; you make the notes descend chromatically and a person sighs; you play a trill, his heart leaps for joy; you play a dance, and his legs start getting itchy. You can create moods, sensations, feelings in the souls of people as you like. Am I right?

Bach nodded. It wasn't quite that easy; but in principle, that's how it was.

Music, Erdmann continued, controls the soul of a human being; it forms it, guides it, leads it to truth or ruin. A musician is a magician, and his magic can be healing or destructive, white or black magic. What kind of magic is yours? I've traveled far, Bach, have gotten around Russia a lot as well, in this gigantic empire where so many different peoples live. There are tribes in remote areas of the Tsar's Empire whose medicine men, or shamans, as they are called, heal diseases by finding out the melody of a disease, its sequence of notes, its sound. And once they have figured out this melody, they sing and dance, and the demon exits the body, so the sick person gets well. With music, you bring salvation or damnation. Music is a heavenly power, yes, but they make music in Hell, too. I

say this, even though I don't believe in Hell, Bach, neither in Heaven nor Hell.

My music, began Bach, was always made for the greater glory of God...

Don't interrupt my train of thought, said Erdmann sharply.

Pythagoras had heard the sounds of the spheres and realized they match the natural tones. Boethius had set up the ideal that earthly music and heavenly music would sound in harmony. And Johann Kepler, even though the crystal spheres of antiquity were not valid for him any longer, has rediscovered the earthly harmonies in the sky. Wasn't that so?

Yes, that's how it was.

So now, continued Erdmann, if the chords on the clavier do not correspond to their perfect ratio any longer, if the notes are tempered – all of them! – the connection to the harmonies of heaven will be forever torn asunder.

But, began Bach, wanting to object that tempering had always been done, in every system, ever since the beginning of polyphony.

No – no buts! Erdmann interrupted him. You have a perfect system, Bach, but what kind of perfection is it? You call it temperament, I call it the rape of nature. You call it temperament, I call it distortion. You call it temperament, I call it a lie. And the lie doesn't only affect the instrument but the soul of men. Because, if there's no purity in music any longer, how can the purity of man's soul survive? When you temper the clavier, you will temper men, Bach.

Werckmeister had said exactly the same thing. Only from a different perspective. Werckmeister literally at the time: Harmonic progression through the circle of fifths could be a model for *all pious and well-tempered people living in eternal harmony with God and rejoicing.*

Shouldn't we be happy when men become less brutish and

warlike, said Bach, when they become more considerate, less irascible, less violent?

Perhaps, Erdmann said, reflecting for a moment. Only I fear, he said quietly, their brutishness and violence will break out even worse in a different place. The well-tempered soldier is only a better killing machine. But this is not only a matter of the brutishness of emotions and their temperance. It's about truth. How will men be able to differentiate between pure and impure, right and wrong, truth and lie, when purity and truth no longer exist?

Oh, what the devil, said Bach. The fifths are tempered only a little bit, one-twelfth comma, that's nothing. Most people wouldn't even hear the difference.

You're the magician, Bach, said Erdmann. The magician who puts their souls out of tune just *a tiny bit*. And I ask you: Is something that's *a tiny bit untrue still true*? No, purity and truth will vanish, because your system doesn't even strive for them any longer. Certainly, your system is not the first to temper the notes. But you are the one who throws out any ambition for purity right from the start. The hell with it – that's your attitude!

Suddenly, Bach recalled a scene with Anna Magdalena. She had come to him in his composer's room in order to rehearse an aria one final time that she wanted to sing at a soiree in the castle that night. He was accompanying her, and, suddenly, she interrupted her singing and said: The clavier is out of tune. – It's not out of tune, he had said, it's well tempered. I know, I know, dear, she had said, and you can play everything with it, all keys, and that's wonderful, but you can't sing to it.

You say, continued Erdmann, your system is round, because you close the circle of fifths. You say your system is perfect, because you can play everything with it. But your system allows for all that only because it denies facts – the fact, for example, that the triad above the keynote is comprised of the overtones.

The first overtones of C – whom am I telling this to? – are E and G, namely a perfect E and a perfect G. But if you temper the E and the G on the clavier, you have separated the third and the fifth from the natural overtones, you have ruptured the combination. In one word: You may compose as beautifully and artfully as you like, it will always be merely an artificial beauty, as artificial as the garden at Versailles or the Great Garden in Dresden, with its precise paths and truncated trees. You may compose as beautifully as you like, it will all be and remain nothing but a miserable effort, against nature.

That's not true, Bach whispered.

Oh, yes, it is, said Erdmann, and I think you know it.

But you said yourself back then, Bach cried out in despair, that a world in which the circle of fifths is not closed is an imperfect world. *God has created an imperfect world.* Those were your words. And that's why we have the task of perfecting it.

Erdmann stood up. He took off his wig as if it were a hat and scratched his bald pate. Then he put it back on. It's getting late, he said with a glance at his silver pocket watch. I've got to go. I have to set off tomorrow at the break of dawn.

Does that mean you're leaving in anger?

In anger? Erdmann asked. Why?

Because of the well-tempered clavier.

Why, no, said Erdmann. No, no. Why should I be angry with you? You do it, I do it, we all do it. Perhaps it's all a matter of the times we live in. Perhaps the truth is nobody can act differently any longer. Perhaps the entire world will be re-tuned. I had hoped art would be the exception. But who am I to be angry with you? In the service of the Tsar, I'm such a person myself, I help building the same world as you. We channel the rivers, you channel the notes. What's the difference?